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The Firings and Foreign Policy

President Ford's firing and hiring binge in the national security establishment last week has upset the balance of US foreign policy in the cause of his personal political ambitions in 1976. It is a separate judgment whether the President's brutal "reorganization" and the creation of what he calls a new "Ford team" in international affairs will actually help him politically, but there is no doubt that he has grievously injured the conduct of American foreign policy, which is in much worse shape than the White House would have us believe.

By removing James Schlesinger from the Defense Department and William Colby from the Central Intelligence Agency, Ford has turned the national security arm of the government into a lameduck operation at a highly critical moment for both political and military decision-making. The year may well run out before the Senate confirms Donald Rumsfeld as Defense Secretary and George Bush as director of Central Intelligence; with acting chiefs at the Pentagon and at Langley, very little usable advice is likely to be heard by Mr. Ford from either of them in the near future. This leaves only Secretary of State Kissinger with hegemony and, probably, with the freedom to do as he pleases for quite a while inasmuch as Ford's acuity in foreign policy has not grown visibly in the last 15 months. The dangers of not having an intelligence chief for many months belatedly dawned on Ford when, four days later, he asked Colby to stay on during the transition. Schlesinger, however, left last week.

Assuming that Rumsfeld and Bush are confirmed—although this will not be a routine exercise—they will be taking office just as the presidential election year opens, with all a campaign's attendant paralyzing effects on foreign policy. In the midst of electioneering they will do their apprenticeship; even Kissinger will be acting under the constraints of presidential politics. Certainly there is nobody around to skillfully shepherd the defense budget through the Congress.

As far as Kissinger's personal position is concerned, the current talk of whether he scored a "victory" when Ford fired Schlesinger (his principal intellectual *bête noire*) or suffered a qualified defeat by having to give up his post as the President's special assistant for national security affairs (something he vowed never to do), is academic and irrelevant. Because Ford created a vacuum in the defense and intelligence areas, Kissinger for better or worse emerges for the time being as the undisputed voice of foreign policy. This may be for him only a short-term gain; in the long run he may be damaged if policy failures develop, for there will be no one to share the blame with him.

Reducing problems that Ford created for himself—and the US—with the "Halloween Massacre" to specific terms, the following situations should be examined:

1). *Détente*. The crux here is a SALT II agreement with the Soviet Union on limiting strategic arms. Although it has been nearly a year since Ford and Chairman Brezhnev met at Vladivostok to outline the framework of SALT II, negotiations have been stalled and the prospects of signing a new accord are dim even though Kissinger claims that 90 percent of the work has been completed. It is the 10 percent that is critical; even Ford conceded at his news conference last week that the US was no longer negotiating under any time pressures.

It is conceivable that with Schlesinger gone, Kissinger may be able to complete an agreement that the former defense secretary had succeeded in blocking on the grounds that Moscow was demanding too many concessions. But it is quite possible that the Senate, where conservatives and liberals alike are disenchanted with Kissinger's brand of *détente*, would not approve such a treaty during an election year. Ironically, then, Schlesinger's removal may make it harder for Kissinger to negotiate a viable SALT II deal. The likelihood, therefore, is that at least with reference to SALT, *détente* will be in limbo until after the 1976 elections. Because Brezhnev was eager for a SALT II pact to crown his career, the Russians may now grow cooler to *détente* in general.

Outside the US only Moscow seemed to applaud Ford's foreign policy team reshuffling. The Soviets had perceived Schlesinger as their most serious adversary in Washington over SALT and defense preparedness. For them the Secretary's demise was a triumph, a fact that raises questions about Ford's understanding of foreign policy processes.

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